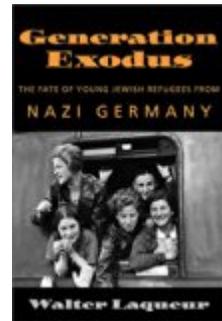


Walter Laqueur. *Generation Exodus: The Fate of Young Jewish Refugees from Nazi Germany*. Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 2001. xvii + 345 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-58465-106-2.

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Exile and the Demise of German-Jewish Culture

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This engagingly written “collective portrait” examines the impact of the emigre experience on young Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany. Unlike other works that focus on state policies concerning refugees, *Generation Exodus* is concerned with a personal level of analysis, and reads like a group memoir. Walter Laqueur seeks to understand the factors that influenced individuals in their decision to leave their homeland, and is able to discover how those who escaped the Holocaust were able to create new homes for themselves.

In 1933, one-fifth of the half-million Jews in Germany were in their teens or early twenties. Drawing on memoirs, letters, and interviews, Laqueur paints a picture of a generation growing up in middle-class, assimilated homes, speaking German, and imbibing German high and low culture. These young adults had not completed their educations, nor established careers at the time of their reluctant departure from Germany. Most had comfortable, “sunny” childhoods, making emigration difficult since it meant “a poorer life not just materially but also culturally” (p. 11). Deprived of the future that they had imagined for themselves, they were forced to find new lives and identities in new countries. It is this group that Laqueur dubs “generation exodus.” The book follows these young adults from their happy childhoods in Germany, through the painful process of emigration and immigration, to their postwar lives and legacies.

Those who left Germany immediately following the Nazi rise to power tended to be political refugees and Zionists. Faced with increasing social isolation and intensified anti-Semitic measures in the mid-1930s, German Jews realized time was running out and sought to emigrate in large numbers, often sending the children first. Once legal means of emigration were closed in 1941, only those with daring and agility—young people—were able to escape. Political resistance within Germany, Laqueur argues, was not possible for a group systematically excluded from society. As refugees, however, German Jews were able to participate in the French underground and to join Allied armies in order to defeat Nazism.

The circumstances under which Jews left Germany form only part of Laqueur’s narrative. The remainder of the book focuses on how the refugees established themselves in their new countries. Laqueur follows the exiles around the world and brings to our attention some lesser known incidents and places of wartime refuge. Students forced from German universities often preferred to continue their studies in German-speaking Switzerland or Austria where language and culture were familiar to them. Some students went to Italy in the 1930s since they were allowed to transfer funds with relative ease to another fascist country. But many emigrants were forced beyond their home continent, and language became a barrier to jobs and integration. Where there was an established Jewish community, the German Jews

frequently found themselves at odds with the predominantly Eastern European Jews who were religiously more traditional and who found the German Jews arrogant in their sense of cultural superiority. Many native populations resented the immigrants, because of the threat of economic competition. In general, the younger children fared the best because schools helped to integrate them. They quickly lost their accents, forgot Germany, and acquired social contacts within the local population. The older ones were often required to work and were unable to complete their educations. They retained memories of life in Germany and their dreams of what should have been. The adjustment was more difficult for them.

Laqueur argues that the futures the refugees built for themselves depended heavily upon the receiving country. Those who found their way to countries built by immigrants, such as Jewish Palestine and the United States, found more of a welcome than did refugees in more closed societies, such as Britain and Latin America. Immigrants to Britain sought to suppress their refugee origins and Jewish identities. In Latin America, only Argentina and Brazil offered a somewhat cultured environment for German Jews. Anti-Semitism and closed hierarchical societies made it nearly impossible for the immigrants to integrate. Eventually thousands left South America for the United States or Israel when they could.

After the war, those Jews who returned to Germany tended to be older. They were the ones who had experienced the most difficulty adjusting to a new country. These "remigrants," as Laqueur calls them, dominated the Jewish organizations of the Federal Republic of Germany until 1992, even though the majority of the postwar German population had Eastern European backgrounds. The German Democratic Republic (GDR) was founded with the help of German-Jewish communists who returned from the Soviet Union, Britain, Shanghai, and other wartime refuges. In the Stalinist attack on those who had spent the war in the West, some Jewish communists found themselves demoted, although not imprisoned. The next generation in the GDR began to rediscover secular Jewish life through discussion and study. It is among the children of the remigrants to Germany (especially of those to the GDR) that Laqueur identifies the leaders of a German-Jewish revival, should there be one.

The book is an interesting addition to the literature on German-Jewish refugees. While it provides the historical context against which German Jews made their decisions and acted, the focus is not on immigration politics but

on individuals and their experiences of displacement. In keeping with the image of a collective portrait, Laqueur compiles and recounts numerous personal recollections. By focusing on the young, he seeks to correct the impression left by psychological studies that displacement was traumatic. He suggests that the young were more adaptable and that being uprooted had little lasting psychological impact on them. Unfortunately for the scholar, there are no notes in the book. Statistics, generalizations, and points of interpretation are without attribution. There is, however, a bibliographical essay that can point the interested reader in a useful direction.

Occasionally, Laqueur's identification with his cohort gets the better of him, revealing a German-Jewish bias. In speaking of ethnic divisions in Israel, he writes, "the aesthetic sense of many German Jews, to give but one example, was more developed than that of their brethren from further east who had no time for such trivial considerations" (p. 106). And of the postwar German-Jewish communities, he observes, "thus the members of the Eastern European Jewish communities in West Germany were primarily interested in their business affairs and professions with little more than a traditional, perfunctory interest in Jewish activities, whereas the erstwhile young Communists from the East, mainly of German Jewish origin and mainly intellectuals, showed considerably more genuine interest in their heritage" (pp. 254-255). He rejects the literary merit of the younger generation of Jewish writers in Germany with, "only some of the young Jews now writing in German are of German origin; more hail from an Eastern European background. Even if their parents were German Jewish by origin, they did not live in a German Jewish milieu, and their knowledge of and interest in the German Jewish heritage is limited" (p. 263). Here we hear the voice of a member of generation exodus who fears his world has no heirs.

What is the legacy of generation exodus? Laqueur states that it is too soon to know what the second and third generations have imbibed of their German-Jewish heritage. The conclusion suggests, however, that he fears there is no one to carry on the tradition, that the cultural tradition he so lovingly describes is coming to an end as generation exodus passes on, and the second generation is assimilated, often Christian, with no connection to Germany or the world their parents had inhabited. One gets the impression that Laqueur is cheering on those children of the GDR who rebelled against the communist regime by investigating their Jewish roots. Perhaps they will become the guardians of his generation's legacy.

Laqueur has written a sensitive portrait of young German Jews who overcame the difficulties of leaving Nazi Germany only to face new trials in their subsequent host countries. The subplot of the story is the demise of a rich German-Jewish culture. Although the book is apparently well researched and contains a nice bibliographical essay, the author foregoes footnotes. The lack of citations may limit the usefulness of the work for scholars, but the readable and poignant narrative could still serve well in the classroom.

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